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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a survey of Texas teacher education programs. The programs investigated whether increased pressure on K-12 teachers to prepare students for mandated tests contributed to dissonance between higher education's expectations for field experiences and preservice students' actual experiences. A questionnaire was mailed to the directors of teacher education at 70 colleges and universities (with a 50-percent return rate). Respondents discussed whether their program had modified its curriculum or instructional practices in direct response to the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS); whether public schools had ever declined to accept their students for field experiences because of TAAS preparation; whether students in field experiences reported restrictions on their curricular and instructional decisions because of the TAAS; and whether teacher education students expressed concerns about their ability to prepare public school learners for the TAAS. Overall, Texas public schools were not refusing to accept teacher education students for fear of damaging TAAS performance, though 21 percent did refuse them for that reason. Most respondents heard complaints from student teachers about restrictions on curricular and instructional decisions because of the TAAS. (SM)

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When School Accountability and Preservice Teachers' Needs Conflict: Effects of Public School Testing on Teacher Education Field Experiences

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When School Accountability and Preservice Teachers' Needs Conflict: Effects of Public School Testing on Teacher Education Field Experiences

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OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are (1) to share the results of a survey of teacher education programs in Texas, and (2) to invite discussion of potential conflicts between the needs of preservice teachers to experiment and "try their wings" in field experiences and the pressure many public school educators feel to produce high scores on accountability tests.

CONTEXT

An increasing number of states require their public schools to administer standardized tests to elementary and secondary students in order to assess, among other things, the effectiveness of instruction in each school. Some of these states have also mandated a detailed curriculum for each grade level and subject area. Schools' test scores often are published in local newspapers so that the public may see how their schools rate. In some states, test results determine whether or not students receive a high school diploma, and whether schools are rewarded or sanctioned. For the past several years scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) have been used to rank elementary and secondary schools, and to determine whether high school graduates receive a diploma. Texas will soon require elementary and secondary students to pass the TAAS in order to be promoted to the next grade.

In addition, secondary end-of-year subject matter tests are now being phased in in Texas.

Because crucial decisions are based on their results, such tests are often described as "high-stakes". Proponents of high-stakes tests argue they are necessary in order to hold schools accountable for producing competent graduates, and to assure that students in our mobile society receive comparable instruction -- at least throughout each state. Critics argue that such rankings are specious, that standardized tests cannot truly measure educational quality (Popham, 1999), that teachers should be allowed greater opportunities to exercise professional judgment, and that states cannot mandate their way to educational excellence. (Kelly, 1999; Kohn, 1999) In fact, in an analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest), Neill and Schaeffer (1998) report that " -- students in high-stakes testing states were more likely to score below the NAEP level of 'basic' in both math and reading. Students from states without required graduation exams more frequently scored at or above 'proficient.' " (p. 1)

Nevertheless, the trend is toward more testing rather than less. Some schools hold pep rallies before testing week to encourage students to do well. Principals and teachers are under great pressure to produce high test scores, often feeling their careers depend on it. Herman and Golan (1993) found that high-stakes testing has " -- substantial effects on schools and the teaching and learning processes within them." (p. 24) From in-depth interviews with Texas teachers about the TAAS, Gordon and Reese (1997) found that " -- for many

schools, high-stakes testing has become the object rather than the measure of teaching and learning, with negative side effects on curriculum, teacher decision making, instruction, student learning, school climate, and teacher and student self-concept and motivation." (p. 345)

At the same time, the trend in teacher education has been toward more field experiences, including observation, field-based methods courses, pre-student teaching field experiences, traditional student teaching, and graduate internships in five-year programs. Learning to teach effectively, many teacher educators believe, requires a series of field experiences in which preservice teachers can begin to make increasingly sophisticated instructional decisions. Authentic teaching experiences, accompanied by supportive coaching, are essential for the development of competent teachers. However, as Burant (1999) has noted, not all experience is educative, and some early field experiences may " -- teach harmful, unintended lessons." (p. 209). In a year-long study of students in two fifth-year teacher education programs, Driscoll and Nagel (1994) described six major areas of discrepancy between what the students were taught on campus and what they observed in their field experiences -- planning, assessment, classroom management, (independent) practice, grouping strategies, and instructional variation. Could increased pressure on k-12 teachers to prepare their students for mandated tests be contributing to further dissonance between higher education's expectations for field experiences and preservice students actual experiences in classrooms?

It would be logical to hypothesize that in states with high-stakes testing, teachers may be especially reluctant to turn curricular and instructional decision making over to novices. The author, who is Director of Field Placement and a professor in a five-year teacher education program in Texas, has heard anecdotal evidence from his students that preparation for the TAAS often severly limits preservice teachers' curricular and pedagogical choices in field experiences. In her weekly journal reflecting on her field experience, one of his students recently wrote, "I am so bored with TAAS drills!" A few schools have even declined to place his students in particular grades at certain times of year because of concerns about TAAS. One principal would not accept field experience students at any grade level for an entire semester, blaming the push to prepare for TAAS. The author wondered if any of the sixty-nine other college and university based teacher education programs in Texas had similar experiences. And since Texas teachers are expected to prepare their pupils to pass the TAAS, have Texas teacher education programs modified their curriculum in response to it?

THE SURVEY

The author designed a questionnaire which was mailed to the directors of teacher education at seventy Texas colleges and universities. Respondents were asked if their program had modified its curriculum or instructional practices in direct response to the TAAS, whether public schools have ever declined to accept their students for field experiences because of TAAS preparation, and whether students in field experiences were reporting restrictions on their

curricular and instructional decisions because of the TAAS. The questionnaire also asked the respondent if their teacher education students were expressing concerns about their ability to prepare public school learners for the TAAS.

RESULTS

Fifty percent of the seventy institutions returned completed questionnaires. While the return rate was less than one would have hoped, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions from this small study. When asked if their teacher education program had modified its curriculum in direct response to the TAAS, **44% said yes**. The following table shows percentages of the entire sample:

Created a new course	**3%**
Modified one course	**3%**
Modified two courses	**12%**
Modified three or more courses	**24%**

Only 24% of respondents reported changes in instructional practices in their program in response to the TAAS. The curricular and instructional modifications mentioned included the following:

Require lesson plans keyed to TAAS objectives.
Require the creation of units aligned with core TAAS objectives.
Offer a workshop on TAAS preparation.
Discuss TAAS in classes; familiarize students with TAAS terminology.
Use more technology (including TAAS website).
Clearly state objectives and competencies on college course syllabi.
Focus more on activities for students from diverse backgrounds.
More emphasis on field based classes.
Have teachers in the field share strategies for TAAS preparation.

Have preservice students take released versions of the TAAS.

Several of the respondents said that while their program had not made modifications in direct response to the TAAS, they now required students to learn about the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), a voluminous, detailed prescription of content and outcomes for all k-12 subject areas and courses. (The extent to which the TAAS and the TEKS align will be discussed later.) A few others said their courses include discussion of both the required Examination for Certification of Educators in Texas (ExCET), and the Professional Development Assessment System (PDAS), the process by which in-service teachers are evaluated.

The following table shows responses to questions about the impact of TAAS preparation on preservice field experiences.

	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
Due to TAAS preparation, schools have declined to place students.	**73%**	**6%**	**9%**	**9%**	**3%**
Students report:					
restrictions on their curricular decisions because of TAAS,	**34%**	**14%**	**20%**	**26%**	**6%**
restrictions on their instructional decisions because of TAAS,	**32%**	**12%**	**24%**	**29%**	**3%**
concern about their ability to prepare learners for TAAS.	**38%**	**24%**	**19%**	**16%**	**3%**

The questionnaire also invited comments, and several respondents accepted the invitation. Acknowledging the reality of today's educational landscape in Texas, one teacher educator stated pragmatically, "We work indirectly with the TAAS (and TEKS) to the extent students have to know what's on them so they can pass the Elementary Comprehensive [portion of] the ExCET."

Most of the other comments about the TAAS and its effects were negative, ranging from a terse, "I think we spend too much time teaching to the test," to a lengthy jeremiad. Said one respondent,

> The tension between the university's need for academic freedom and the school districts' need for teachers who can meet state mandates has never been so great. And it developed as teacher education became field-based, so there are intense and increasing limitations imposed on a university faculty member who would prefer to expose students to a broad range of teaching options.

Another complained,

> TAAS has impacted our field experiences in that public school teachers are not teaching social studies and science except in connection with reading. Students do not have the opportunity to see these content areas in the primary grades. Shame!

Lamented one teacher educator,

> At this university, we are trying to prepare teachers to function in learner-centered schools. This is at considerable variance with the aims of the schools themselves. They are not learner-centered but TAAS-centered.

This last comment is mordantly ironic. In 1994, the Texas Education Agency (the equivalent of the Department of Education in other states) adopted and

published *Learner-Centered Schools for Texas: A Vision of Texas Educators*. These guidelines, still in effect, describe the proficiencies Texas public school educators must demonstrate. The five proficiencies for teachers are: Learner-Centered Knowledge, Learner-Centered Instruction, Equity in Excellence for All Learners, Learner-Centered Communication, and Learner-Centered Professional Development. The current Professional Development Assessment System for teachers is based on those proficiencies.

At one institution, students in field experiences complain that their supervisors "don't teach the _____ University way", according to the respondent. "The TAAS objectives are taught by drill-and-practice, paper and pencils panic techniques that are contrary to everything we know to be true about learning."

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that, on the whole, cooperating public schools in Texas are not refusing to accept teacher education students for fear of damaging their performance on TAAS. . However, 21% of respondents did report that the schools they work with declined to take their students for that reason sometimes, often, or always. One out of five is not a negligible number. What this limited questionnaire could not tell us is whether demurring schools were refusing all placement requests, or were unwilling to take teacher education students only at certain grade levels, or whether they were more likely to beg off during the spring semester when TAAS is administered.

A majority of respondents said they hear complaints from their students in the field about restrictions on their curricular decisions (52%) and instructional decisions (56%) because of the TAAS. It is impossible to say to what extent this may differ from the limitations preservice teachers report in states without high-stakes tests, but apparently those in Texas are experiencing a good deal of frustration. Sixty-two percent of the respondents say their students have expressed little or no concern about preparing their future learners for the TAAS, an encouraging sign. However, one wonders what should be done to build the confidence and allay the anxieties of those students who do have such concerns.

Earlier in this paper, the author referred to the TEKS, the comprehensive, state mandated curriculum with learner objectives. The questionnaire did not ask about the TEKS. Nevertheless, several respondents said their teacher education programs teach their students about the TEKS, not the TAAS, asserting that the TAAS is based on the TEKS. This assumption may not be warranted. TAAS objectives are published separately from the TEKS, and they each grew out of related but separate efforts, the former to determine whether schools are enabling learners to become competent in mathematics, reading and writing, the latter to assure that schools across the state are teaching the same curriculum. Raising this issue, one questionnaire respondent commented on a recent conference in Austin where a state official "assured us that the TEKS and TAAS will be correlated, and universities must be 'in step.' --

We trust that it's true that ExCET, TEKS, and TAAS will soon be congruent, although our public school contacts are less optimistic."

Looking back at the preceding pages, a reader may be tempted to ask, "So what?" After all, Texas teachers *should* understand the TAAS and know how to help children and adolescents excel on it. The TAAS is not going away! Only 21% of the responding teacher educators reported problems placing students because of TAAS concerns. And hasn't there always been discrepancy between what preservice teachers are taught by their professors and what they often see in the public schools? Perhaps. But the objections raised by some of the respondents in this study deserve careful consideration. Again, if one in five have encountered at least some difficulty in placing teacher education students because of TAAS fears in the schools, what does this bode for the future of field experiences, their quality and authenticity? (I will not even mention the extra time and headaches for those responsible for placement!)

Of course, soundly designed, judiciously used assessment is essential at all levels of education. It also makes some sense for all public schools in a state to focus on at least a core curriculum rather than to have what Gordon Cawelti has called a crazy-quilt of offerings from district to district. However, with Texas' TAAS, TEKS, ExCET, PDAS, and Proficiencies for Learner-Centered Schools, do we have high-stakes assessments, mandated curriculum, and proficiency standards virtually bumping into each other? Which tail is wagging whose dog?

We must remember that many regions of the country, including Texas, are experiencing a shortage of qualified teachers. At the same time teacher educators are striving to attract bright, committed young people into teaching, some states are making the profession even less appealing by placing enormous pressure on public schools to teach a prescribed curriculum and to produce high scores on pencil-and-paper tests, pressure that makes reformers' calls for "empowered teachers" and "professional decision-makers" sound quixotic at best.

If they have an opportunity to read them, few reasonable people would disagree that public school students should master the TAAS objectives in reading, writing and mathematics. The tests go beyond minimum skills and do call for some critical thinking. The greatest problems caused by the TAAS are the narrowing of too many schools' field of vision, curricularly and pedagogically; the distortion of purpose that leads some schools to exempt as many students from the TAAS as possible; and the anxiety -- even fear -- produced by a near-obsession with one set of test scores.

Yet all need not be utterly bleak. There are schools in Texas where TAAS scores are high, but teachers and students are excited about learning, curriculum is integrated and enriched, teachers plan for TAAS preparation together under enlightened leadership, and worksheets are used lightly. In these schools, economic and ethnic sub-populations tend to pass the TAAS at the same rate as the dominant population. No public school in Texas can ignore the TAAS any more than Damocles could ignore the sword, but some

seem to do well while minimizing the most negative effects of "test mania." The daunting challenge for teacher educators is to find such schools and cultivate them as field sites. Since it is unlikely there are enough of these schools to go around, professors of education and supervisors of field experiences in Texas will have to continue walking a knife edge. On the one hand, they must prepare students to deal with the realities of Texas public schools, building the confidence of the capable but anxious, and gently confronting the assumptions of the idealistic rebels who wish to ignore the TAAS. On the other hand, they must be tirelessly innovative and persistent in persuading their students that public school teaching can and should be more than merely preparing learners for high-stakes tests.

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